

**Naval Historical Center
Oral Interview Transcript**

Interviewers:

CAPT Gary Hall
CAPT Mike McDaniel
CDR Carol O'Hagan
CDR Karen Loftus
YNCS Kathy Wright

Interviewer's Organization:

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Interviewee:

SGT Ronald Alan Gale

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Abstract of Interview:

Interviewee Information:

Born and raised in Washington, D.C., attended high school and college in the area. During Vietnam college deferments were cancelled, and he wasn't interested in the Army. His Uncle had been on the *New Jersey*; two of his cousins survived Pearl Harbor while on the *Arizona*; has a cousin who was a Navy Pilot in Pearl Harbor, one of the few who got an aircraft off during the attack. His wife's father is a Major, and his father before him was in WWII. She was a Nurse at Bethesda, now an administrator at Walter Reed. Due to this Navy background joined the Naval Reserve. His background as a volunteer in a rescue squad in Bethesda got him into a Navy Corp Unit. Went on active duty in 1969. First assignment was Reda, Spain, then Camp Le Juenne. Reported aboard the *USS Newport News* at Norfolk, and left a week later for Subic Bay, Philippines where his ship joined the *Kennedy* and the *USS New Jersey* and went to Vietnam. In-country in Vietnam 92 days doing special operations up and down the northwest coast of DMZ. Supported Ranger SEALs and CIA operations. Was extended twice in the Navy and came out in '71. Recruited to work National _____ Help. Good assignments, but didn't like working inside. Applied for US Park Police in '73. Worked in radar on GW Parkway from '73 to '77. Due to his combat medic background was recommended to transfer to the helicopter branch when it expanded. His pilot training had been "informal" in Vietnam, The first helicopter he flew was a Schanook. Park Police assigned him to aviation in 1977. In 1979 they sent him to flight school

and he became a full-fledged pilot in '87. Is now a Senior Pilot with the Park Police for whom he's worked almost thirty years. His most memorable events at work are: 1981 the day Air Florida crashed around Pentagon; on 9-11-01 when the Pentagon was attacked, the day President Reagan was shot; the day Desert Storm broke out. Transported Hinkley and James Earl Ray and other high profile prisoners. Most interesting was three Mafia bosses (one of the bosses had a son in the Academy at Annapolis), and a hit man from New York.

He will retire in July, and has a son who is going in the Army on an ROTC Scholarship.

Topics Discussed:

Q. (117) Tell us about that day [September 11th]. Walk us through your experiences that day.

A. Well it started out to be a little bit of an unusual day anyway. We were gearing up for the International Monetary Fund demonstrations which we all anticipated to be very violent; very different than anything we've had in a long time. So we had all the uniform Health Services people here, doctors and medics from USEF (phonetic) down here. So that was a little bit different than what we usually do. They were out in the field training and we were actually field daying – doing a Field Day on the hanger, washing and such. It was a nice day.

One of the medics came to the door and said, "Hey you've got to see this. A plane just hit one of the World Trade Center towers."

Well, OK you know. I'll put down my mop long enough to go and see that, and we did and we're sitting there and my first thought was you know that's kind of a strange accident. We all were thinking accident. That's really unusual, but it can happen. Yeah it can happen. We're thinking like small plane until we saw the amount of fires involved. Right at that time while we were discussing it we saw the second aircraft coming around and we all looked at each other. We knew. We just knew. I mean we just started talking, "Hey, we'd better get ready."

Now the time period, everything happened to me kind of quickly and I don't know that I can put exact timeframes on this, but it was all around 9:30, 9:25.

Right as we were in there discussing and we were moving toward the aircraft and discussing whether or not we should put some high-density litter kits, patient kits in the aircraft or not you know, we could be next. Right about then we heard the boom.

Q. (140) Did you know at that point?

A. We did. I didn't have to have that look. I knew. We all knew. We just looked. We knew. We knew. You know I mean we've all been expecting something like this for, an attack of some sort. This particular way that it was done? No. Not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined somebody would have done that, but soon as we looked over at the Pentagon we just saw the smoke just starting to come off, and then the crash _____(145).

Q. (145) Did you know it was the Pentagon when you looked over that way?

A. No.

Q. Did you suspect it was?

A. Yeah, I mean I suspected it was some military installation over there. Obviously the Pentagon from the air would be the most obvious one, and then when the crash phone rang and the guy, APC supervisor said that they had lost a 757 somewhere in the vicinity of the Pentagon. We launched an aircraft. KENNY BRETOL(phonetic) and his crew launched first Eagle Two, and we launched right after Eagle One and both arrived on the scene, I believe, within I would say easily within four minutes of the impact on the building we were over the top.

My first, all of our impressions were it couldn't possibly have been a 757. Building had not collapsed at that point and there was spot fires everywhere. In fact the most fire that I saw was

the crash truck, foam truck on fire. That was creating the greatest amount of fire at the particular point and it was a relatively small hole in the side of the building.

I'm going, "This couldn't possibly have been a 757." There's absolutely nothing that you could identify as an aircraft part anywhere around there. Nothing. Just couldn't have been.

While this is going on, I was seeing people running out on fire. So there was two or three individuals running away from the building on fire. We were busy talking, setting up, listen. Here this is exactly what we're going to do.

Fire Department apparatus was still responding to the scene and one of the fire department personnel in conjunction with the military, but I saw quite a few military people assisting in setting a LZ on the roadway right next to the heliport. We made the decision between our two crews that KENNY would land with his aircraft and his crew, because he had, they had actually a physician's assistant and they had a lot more medical people on board. Military medical people onboard too, so that would be the thing to do. My crew and myself stayed in the air and assumed command and control of the airspace right there.

I don't know, did KENNY go into exactly what the entails?

Essentially what you're doing, is yeah you're setting up future LZs. You're picking LZs for the ground people to come in and set up and actually controlling the airspace. Having people stay away from the airspace consumption. Who can come in? What corridors they're going to use to do that and that type of thing. I guess I'd made three or four orbits in a command, control function when the air traffic control supervisor at the tower said, "Eagle One, we can't see anything outside the tower. It's getting in our ventilation system. We're abandoning the tower. You've got the airspace."

I'm going, "Exactly what I need right now, is I've got control of the airspace." But unbeknownst to me I did not know that they'd already shut down the National system. I didn't know that.

Q. (188) They didn't both to tell you?

Q. (Another) Were they directed to shut down until, or was this a voluntary part –

A. The FAA, somebody in the FAA, or the military or in both in conjunction with NORAD shut the airspace for the country down. I didn't know that. I had no idea.

Q. Right, that shut down, right.

A. I had no idea I mean we, you're very focused in what you're doing at the time and some of those peripheral things just kind of register back here and then later on you go, "Gees, I wonder if they gave me that? I wonder why that happened?" or this happened. It was just, information started filtering through.

As soon as he said to switch to NORAD, which is a discreet frequency for NORAD, I knew it was _____ (185). It's on you know, there's something big time wrong here. First thing the NORAD person, controller told me is "Look, we want you to know that you've got another incoming unauthorized target. Help her out and it's in 20 minutes."

Great. I said, "OK," at the same time KENNY and his crew had loaded two patients, the first two patients and had taken off. Just prior to lifting from the ground they advised us that they had at least eleven more to be medivaced. We were still the only two aircraft on the scene. Nobody else had gotten there yet. We had called for additional medivac. Maryland State told us that - the first ones we call for is Maryland State. They had the most resources for aircraft, medivac aircraft that

we knew were manned and ready to go. We were very shocked when they came back and said, "No, we can't respond."

I'm going, "What!" See that's when we were starting to suspect there was something more to it.

"Why can't you respond?"

You know we didn't have time to go into all that. We didn't know the airspace was shut down.

So we called for, to private people MedStar and AirCare at Fairfax Hospital. They hadn't gotten the word that the airspace was shut down and since I'm the one who requested the aircraft and informed NORAD, NORAD allowed them to come in. Maryland didn't know, and - they just didn't know, if we requested them they could come. There was just a lot of misinformation - I mean you can imagine.

So the next aircraft to arrive on the scene was MedStar's aircraft and they actually took the third patient. In the interim of all of this happening I requested my paramedic to get Metropolitan Police and have their helicopter come up and relieve us. They weren't medivac capable, but they had a really nice little aircraft to do command/control functions and I said, "You know we're going to have to do a medivac mission here. We're going to have to relinquish the command/control function to somebody else."

They came up and did a real good job with it. I mean at the time we didn't know that, the eleven patients we thought we going to be medivac out were all dead. I mean they, we would had IU would have known that. But we landed right after Eagle One took off, or Eagle Two took off. We landed behind them and then -

Q. (227) And that was your first time being down? You were up the whole time?

A. That is correct. Then my crew was deployed and they were out and about and I had no idea. I'm sitting there as PIC, running behind the aircraft. I don't know where they were and then NORAD comes back and says, "You've got a six minutes ETA on the inbound target." I'm saying, "Well, I wonder how mad by crew would be if I took off?" Maybe not a good idea. So we were sitting there and just kind of wondering for what seemed to be an eternity, you know, I wondered which target this is going to be. The pentagon's hit. Maybe the White House, maybe the Capital. I don't know.

But it was a little hairy there for a little while. Then my crew came back and said, "No, that was it. Nobody left that needs to be evaced out."

Right at that same time we were getting numerous requests from the FBI to downlink information with the Electwave (phonetic) downlink on the camera that's on the aircraft. So we launched again and starting to doing orbits for the FBI, and that's actually shared frequency for the Secret Service and the FBI.

Q. (241) Did they indicate to you that they had the lead, that they were in charge of the operation at that point?

A. We never heard from the FBI.

Q. Never heard from the FBI. I'm kind of curious when that word got out. Talking to –

A. Immediately, I'm saying the FBI was on top of this within, I think within ten minutes or fifteen minutes of being at the Pentagon. We heard from them immediately. Start your downlink, we want to capture everything that we can. I bet you one of the first federal agencies that I saw were FBI agents from this – you know already there collecting evidence and such.

We saw what appeared to us to have been the flight path of the aircraft with the lights being knocked down and such, but that was only supposition on our part at that point.

I just, I just can't emphasize enough, the initial damage, looking at it, it just didn't look like a 757 hit that building. But of course during all this right after Eagle Two had taken off, or as they were taking off it seems in my mind, the building started, it collapsed and I'm going, "Oh, Oh, Not good." But even with the collapse it still didn't look like a 757 hit it.

However, so we assumed the FBI downlink function and then we were asked to land several times and pick up battalion chiefs from Arlington Fire Department so they can have an aerial platform to better organize and fight the fire through some of the agencies involved. The problem they were having, in the middle corridors their power ladders pipe would not reach the fire. They were having a very difficult time and they had just determined that they were going to have to fight that fire with personnel on top of the roof and they were really trying to avoid doing that because you know that's very, very dangerous really for the folks. So as soon as they deployed the firemen on the roof they wanted us off.

We flew a lot that day. I mean a lot more besides - I'm intimately familiar with the roof of the Pentagon at this point. Really a tough fire to get under control for them though. Really was. I think I ended my shift that day at 1900 hours, I believe. And probably had flown a total of about six or seven hours. The amount of flying after that was intense, too. The Secret Service had determined that they wanted two of their agents in our aircraft up in DC in the prohibited area twenty-four hours a day, I mean all the time. So we were relieving each other on station. That was a lot of flying and then started backing down a little bit at a time. That's pretty much it. I can't think of anything more outstanding then the events that I've just outlined.

Q. (282) Talk to us a little bit about the interaction between the various agencies.

A. Well in my opinion that it was extremely well organized. I mean the first responding units, between Arlington Fire Department, Alexandria, and DC Fire. Some communication problems, but everybody just seemed to know where to go and what they needed to do. I think we have to take a little bit of credit. We got the air assets very well organized and accommodated so there were plenty of medivac aircraft there in case we had anymore patients.

The only confusion came a little bit later in the day and do you know what [] is? You know what the code word for []? Well, and that word has changed almost yearly. [] has stayed around for last couple two three years now. That's a call sign for the military aircraft coming to evacuate generals, cabinet level officials and such like that, and when you hear that you know that you're going to have to give way to those military folks. I mean they're going to come in regardless. Well the poor guy in Condor, he didn't know what it was. I knew what it was, but we were on the ground at the time picking up a fire chief. This military flight was coming up from Belabor and used the [] sign and said they were coming in to land the east ramps at the Pentagon. That new area that they just built. Can't remember what term he used, but Condor said, "No, you can't come in. You have to stay down at Wilson Bridge."

I got on the radio and said, "No, no, you don't understand. They're going to come in."

He, "Well, I've got command control."

I said, "Look it's a military flight. They're going to come in. They're going to come in and land."

And they did, you know. That was the only little bit of confusion. We had no way of talking to the military aircraft except on civilian frequencies, and some of them didn't know, some of them stayed on the UHF military frequencies which should cause some confusion, and that will probably be brought up some after-action stuff later on.

Q. (318) What about the air control function that you all played temporarily. Tell us a little bit about that, then what had happened at the Reagan Airport tower.

A. Well again shortly after we arrived on the scene, within five minutes of doing two or three orbits around the Pentagon, air traffic control supervisor at Reagan National said they could no longer man the tower for the smoke and gave the air traffic control responsibility to us. Again I was not aware that they had shut down the entire airspace system. I had no way of knowing that. So I'm thinking, normally this is an extremely busy area for helicopters, and I'm going, "well I mean I've got this job to do down here and then I've got to control air traffic coming in and out." But NORAD immediately advised me, "Look, you have no traffic in DC, except for the traffic that you're calling. The aircraft that you're calling in we're going to allow to come in. Other than that there should be no one besides the military and we'll call you out the military traffic." So that helped tremendously. That function alone was not very taxing except to try to scare up some medivac aircraft. We thought we were going to need a lot, and to coordinate them and get them in. Make sure NORAD knew that they were coming in, because we knew that there were F16s buzzing around and at that time we didn't know that they were also charging everything. I think our two aircraft were about the only ones that the jet jocks knew were there and authorized. Everybody else, the MedStar aircraft and AirFare, no. Some serious stuff. I mean it was, one of the Fairfax Police aircraft it scared the pilot so bad, he would not come back in, inside the beltway. I mean you know an F16 locked on him, because he did not have his code and he was coming in and NORAD didn't know about it. They, you know, they locked him. So it's, that was enough. I think if it had been me that would have been enough for me too.

Q. (351) Could you see the military aircraft?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell us about that?

A. Can't remember the name on the helmet, but we were close enough to see that (interviewer chuckles). One of my medics onboard the aircraft said, 'Boy, there's something fast coming up the river.'

I look over and I can't swear this is the direction. Someplace on the Wilson Bridge area, the F16, we were about 400 feet and he came from here to the hanger door. (chuckle) I mean I could see his face in the cockpit. One of them peeled up and went high and the rest of them just kept up in a straight northerly direction. So we were told later that that was a flight that intercepted, that went up to Pennsylvania, the other one went high and stayed over DC. We were told that by some Andrews people, but I don't know. Can I confirm it? No.

I can confirm the F16 that I looked out and saw. No question about that, and our friend stayed within visible range for the rest of the day, actually the rest of the week. That's pretty much it.

Q. (375) Homeland Defense, have you seen from your years of experience, now that we're looking at, I know the Department of Defense is taking a real hard look at what we see what the Navy's role is in Homeland Defense. Is that something that you're seeing a new thrust in this area, or is that kind of just a continuance of what you all already do?

A. Absolutely it's a continuance of what we already do. There's some expanded roles. Since the 11th, the immediate impact on our operation, operational change here is that we were a two person crew scenario where we were flying with a pilot and paramedic, and we immediately

went to three-man, three person crew. These aircraft are very sophisticated and obviously from your ride you can see that we have a lot of equipment in there. In order to do that job, if we hadn't had three people per aircraft the day of the Pentagon it would have been overwhelming for the crew. So we've decided to do that at all cost. I mean we're working twelve hours shifts. The guys are working their days off, but we're going to maintain that. We started doing things we never did before. Checking bridges on patrols. Chasing trucks, I can't tell you how many times we tracked down Ryder trucks or Hertz trucks or whatever. Couple weeks ago we got an alert from the – we're getting these alerts from the FBI every now and then. There was a trailer full of nitrous fertilizer that was stolen from a truck stop on the New Jersey Turnpike. They left the tractor, but they took the trailer full of fertilizer. That's not a good thing.

Then there was a tractor, a Navy tractor stolen from the weapons facility down Charles County. Just the tractor, and the FBI rightfully so, said, "This is not a good thing." You know a Navy tractor with US Government tags on it could probably go anywhere they wanted to go without being really seriously investigated too much. But it just turns out to be a coincidence, but I'll tell you what, we looked high and low for that stuff for a couple days. Lot of flight time, and it turned out to be just a strange coincidence. The only thing that never turned up was the Navy's tractor, but the trailer full of the fertilizer turned up down in, on the eastern shore somewhere.

Why do you want a – that's all we heard, but those are the types of things that we've been doing that we never did before.

There is just nothing outrageous in the flight anymore. I mean nobody sits here and says, "Well, that's stupid to go out and look for anything." You don't hear that anymore. It's like anything's in the ballpark now. I mean, "Yeah, that sounds kind of outrageous," but we're going to take it seriously. We're going to go out and really try to find, or whatever mission that they give us,

we're going to try it. We're not going to approach it lightheartedly at all. It's just, who would ever have thought? I mean what? It's insane. That's about it.

Q. (427) Any internal organizational changes, and a related question is you've interfaced with the many different organizations, agencies that you already had dealt with, any changed in how you interact with them in their priority scale, or what and how you share information?

A. The first change I would have to say is that this is the first time that, in my recollection, that we have worked as closely with military entities as we have. I mean we had the 82nd airborne two days after the Pentagon incident, come here and request air support from us. We coordinated that we, and since they took over security over there. That is very unusual, and they were very glad to get the support that we were going to give them. We actually had a couple calls where we've interacted with the troops on the ground. So that's one area.

The rest I think is still a little bit too early to really say what the outcome of any changes of the interaction between agencies are, because everybody's still doing their after-action reports.

They're still trying to see where the weaknesses were. Clearly to me there's some communications - communications always seems to be right up there number one on the hit parade as the things that you can probably improve on. There's no question that day that communications could have been improved on, but there's a whole list of scenarios that have to be looked at communications-wise. I mean you had five different fire departments working there. You had six or seven police agencies. Every FUTAL (phonetic) agency under the sun was there, and for all of that I think it went well. I still have, now these two aircraft out here, I think one reason that it always seems to go a little bit better for us is we have a whole gamut of radio frequencies we can tap into. That costs us a heck of a lot of money to put those in those aircraft,

but it really pays off in that incident. I mean we were talking to Arlington on any frequency they want, Alexandria, any police Department. We would even be able to dial up the military freqs on the folks on the ground. It seems like one area the military is a little bit weak in, and particularly the Army, they don't have a lot of resources to go to civilian frequencies. They really like the UHF frequencies better, which is understandable in the end for what the mission is. So that would be one area that I think they have to look at.

To answer your question again directly, except for the interaction with the military, which was a definite media change, everything else I think is coming. It's just not there yet.

Now we did sit down with the Maryland State Police and iron out a couple things, like four days later. "Look if we call for you and we tell you that we've got you the clearance, you are clear to come in." That was a heck of a resource we lost right there because of that lack of communication. Those folks have 12 medivac helicopters. Eight that are manned 24/7. That's a lot of, that's a huge resource. We didn't really see the military medivac support aircraft. I think they got there late in the afternoon, I think. It was kind of foggy. I know that they were there definitely the next day, but for the first important four or five hours civilian resources were it. That was it. That would have been it.

Q. (496) Anything included in planning sessions with some of these other agencies, I mean that they understand a little bit more what you do, what capabilities you have, what roles you play? I would think that would be important, an important part of your after-action for understanding what you all have to offer.

A. Right, well de-briefings have started and I've always considered de-briefing as a planning session, part of the beginnings of a planning session. So we've done two de-briefings, one in Arlington and one for our police force and I'm sure more will come.

Now whether everybody sits down at the same table. You know, identifying the players is probably the number one hardest thing to do on a day like that. You know, who the heck, who was all there, you know. Who was doing what. Well, from my perspective I know that there was a lot of military folks there. You know I saw every branch of the service represented. But for the rest of it we were just so focused in on what we had to do. I know Arlington Fire Department was there, because we had their people in the aircraft. I know that DC Fire and Alexandria Fire, because I saw their equipment. But to be able to put all of that together and write a report, I would not be the one tasked to do that, because that was, geez, there was just a ton of folks.

There was one department there I never heard of. Some little police department. I understand just like one guy in Virginia. It's like a little one man police department, heard about this and on his own initiative came up from 95 you know from Southern Virginia someplace.

I saw Decoma (phonetic) Park policemen on a traffic post. You know that's up there near Silver Spring, Maryland. Was he called? I have no idea. There was just a lot of people just took it on themselves to respond.

We were called. We were dispatched by National airport. That's part of our, in the Council of Governments response plan, so that I can tell you for sure, but how many agencies were there as a result of a response plan? I couldn't tell you. Arlington probably has a really good handle on that.

Q. (541) So you're retiring in July. Where does Ron Galey go from here?

A. Where his wife tells him to. (everyone laughs)

Q. All right, good official answer, but where does Ron Galey go from here?

A. I want to fly still, and I'm actually looking at - the Maryland State Police is hiring, they're hiring civilian pilots for operations. I'm 52. I think I've got a couple good years still cranked up in me somewhere. I still like to fly. My wife she doesn't want me doing it anymore. She worries constantly about the job and the danger and everything and she just wants a normal life. I can't blame her in that. She put up with this for thirty years and it's - gosh I'm a kid. I love this stuff. I just love it. If they would have left me on the - she laughs about this, and she knows I loved being shipboard in the Navy so much, because I started dating her just before I got out. I come home and I was just so happy to be on the *Newport News*, and to me that was just the essence of what being in the Navy was all about. It was a heavy cruiser with teakwood decks and spit and polish. I loved all that stuff.

_____, Aye, aye. Well, he didn't know much. He was Coast Guard, you know he got his knees wet and he was all upset. So we waded ashore, what's the trouble.

But yeah, that was, she used to laugh at me all the time, if they'd just left me alone. I knew the Navy. You know if they thought I was going to be happy someplace, they would move me again. But I was very fortunate, I just got to see everything in the Navy. That was just great. I loved it, and that's not to stroke you at all. I really, really enjoyed my time in the Navy. I really did. Had a great, great career.

Q. (588) Anything else you want to add for the historical record?

A., No, I don't. That's it. I'm talked out.

Q. OK, thank you very much.

Transcribed by; Ethel Geary
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